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ABSTRACT

The Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP) and the National Coalition for Advocates for Students (NCAS) launched separate inquiries into how American public education could be improved without excluding poor, minority, female, and handicapped youngsters. HPDP reported on the performance of Hispanic students in inner-city high schools in "Make Something Happen: Hispanics and Urban School Reform," while NCAS investigated the circumstances of all disadvantaged public school students in its report, "Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk." Both reports claim that the dropout rates and low achievement levels of a staggering number of minority and poor children not only subvert the nation's deepest values of fairness, they threaten its economic social fabric. One general conclusion is drawn by both reports: there are two systems of public education in the United States, one rich with resources and talent that serves middle-class and affluent Whites, the other, a "pauper's system" that seems headed for a decline. Many analysts quoted in the reports believe that school reform, to benefit poor and minority children, must redefine the scale and scope of the problem, including a redefinition of what constitutes a high-risk student. Above all, they say, students must be given the feeling that adults care about them, and are interested in their progress. In general, the reports emphasize, stronger links must be constructed between teachers, parents, communities, and businesses, and all must actively cooperate, for without reform, schools will continue to perpetuate the inequalities in the larger society. (KH)

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Renegotiating Society's Contract with the Public Schools:

The National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics and the National Board of Inquiry into Schools

In the early evening of March 26, 1984, some 500 parents, children, and community leaders held a memorial service at a church on the northwest side of Chicago. After the service they marched half a mile, crossed Humbolt Park—turf claimed by two warring youth gangs—and stopped in front of Roberto Clemente High School. At the head of the procession four pallbearers carried an old, scarred wooden coffin draped with a sheet. For these marchers the coffin symbolized the sudden, violent death of some of the thousands of youngsters who drop out of Chicago's public schools each year.

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The Reverend Charles L. Kyle, associate pastor of St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church, helped organize the march to Clemente, where he estimates that 70 percent of the students leave before graduation. The next morning he testified at a hearing in Chicago conducted by the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics.

"I've buried 18 kids under 18 who've been killed on the streets," he told the Commission members. "Every time I ask the mother, 'Where did he go to school?', the answer's always the same: 'Oh, he dropped out.' The last kid I buried, I went back to the high school principal and said, 'I want to talk to you about José.' The principal said, 'Wait a second, I'll get him out of class.' I said to him, 'You can't do that. He's dead, I buried him.' I wanted to scream, 'Doesn't anybody care what happens to the kids in this school?' "

Doesn't anybody care? That is perhaps the central question posed by two comprehensive reports on the education of "children at risk," issued recently by the National Commission and by another panel, the National Board of Inquiry into Schools. The question assumes special significance in light of the spate of reports coming out in the past two years pointing up gross deficiencies in the quality of education for all American children. The best known of these, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, warned that a "tide of mediocrity" was overtaking the nation's public schools and urged "fundamental reform" of the education system by renewing this country's "commitment to schools and colleges of higher quality throughout the length and breadth of our land."*

Since *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, there have been at least 30 other national studies of education, 290 state commission and blue-ribbon task force reports, two network television documentaries, and widespread newspaper and magazine coverage of the problems of public schools.

The vast majority of these studies and commentaries have called for raised academic standards, tighter discipline, a return to the "basics" in school curricula, and incentives to improve teaching. In most instances, however, the call for reform has not been accompanied by commensurate concern for ensuring educational equity. The "great education reform movement" has not emphasized the "unfinished task of offering every child — black, Hispanic, native American, Asian, and white — a fair chance to learn and become a self-sufficient citizen," say members of the Board of Inquiry.

In the view of the two panels and a number of leading policy analysts and school administrators, the relative inattention to changes required for educating minority, low-income, female, and handicapped youngsters is a critical flaw in the current drive for educational excellence. As Ernest L. Boyer, president of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has put it, "Of special concern is the fact that black and Hispanic students are precisely those who have been least well served by public education. . . . The current debate about school reform is disturbingly silent on this point. Do we mean excellence for all, or for the privileged few?"*

James Vásquez, superintendent of schools in the Edgewood School District of San Antonio, puts the issue even more bluntly: "The prevailing attitude in the school system is that you develop excellence through exclusivity. In the past, when poor and minority kids were kept out of the schools, test scores were high. Now people are saying, 'Let's exclude them again and the scores will go up and we can all boast that American education is in great shape.' "

Whether or not one agrees with Vásquez's characterization, there can be little argument, judging from the evidence amassed by the two panels, that millions of American children with special needs are not faring well in public schools; millions, in fact, are not in school at all.

To focus public attention on this situation, the Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP) and the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) each launched separate inquiries into the question of how American public education could be advanced *without* excluding poor, minority, female, and handicapped youngsters. Both were given partial support from Carnegie Corporation. HPDP was organized in 1982 to address the concerns of Hispanics in the United States on a range of policy issues and to evaluate policy options for dealing with their needs and problems. Its 16-member commission was formed that year under the codirection of Mari-Luci Jaramillo, associate dean of education at the University of New Mexico and former U.S. ambassador to Honduras, and Paul N. Ylvisaker, dean emeritus of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. After taking testimony from more than 100 witnesses in five cities with substantial Hispanic populations,** the Commission issued its report, *Make Something Happen: Hispanics and Urban School Reform*, in December 1984.

The NCAS, a network of child advocacy organizations working on public school issues at the local, state, and federal levels, also formed its 17-member Board of Inquiry in 1982. Cochaired by Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, and Harold Howe II, former U.S. commissioner of education, the Board held hearings in ten cities,*** in which 285 witnesses from all regions testified. The product of its inquiry is the report, *Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk*, which was published in January 1985.

The work of the panels was supplemented by extensive research reviews. The National Commission, in addition, analyzed data from the "High School and Beyond" survey, a national longitudinal study of 58,000 high school sophomores and seniors, undertaken by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics. (For a list of all panel members, see page 11.)

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* *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which was formed at the direction of former U.S. Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, in 1981.

* "The Test of Growing Student Diversity," by Ernest L. Boyer, *New York Times*, Winter Education Supplement, November 11, 1984.

** Los Angeles, San Antonio, Miami, New York City, and Chicago.

*** Boston, Louisville, Chicago, Lansing, Detroit, New York City, Atlanta, Cleveland, Seattle, and San Antonio.

The Findings

The HPDP Commission limited its study to the performance of Hispanic students in inner-city high schools; the NCAS Board investigated the circumstances of all disadvantaged public school students. Both make the same fundamental claim: the dropout rates and low achievement levels of a "staggering number" of minority and poor children not only subvert the nation's deepest values of fairness, they threaten its economic and social fabric. The Board of Inquiry report is explicit: "The ways our local, state, and national governments and our schools deal with these children supports the worries of those who fear the development of a permanent underclass in America." The National Commission drives the point home with a lesson in demographics: Hispanics are the youngest and fastest growing population group in the nation.* As the general population ages, Hispanics will become the majority of the school population in many parts of the nation. The future and prosperity of these communities will be correspondingly related to the development and progress of the youthful population upon which they will draw. These young people, the Commission says, will or will not be creative forces in art, science, government, business, and industry largely as a result of what happens to them in schools.

The Board of Inquiry estimates that as many as eight million children out of a school population of forty million are treated by school officials and policymakers as though they do not matter. "Minority children do not matter as much as non-minority children do to some school officials, judging by the disproportionate numbers of such children who are excluded and underserved by the schools," says the Board. "Poor children, too, are considered less important than non-poor children, if we contrast the level of financing allocated for their education with that allocated for children in more affluent districts. Non-English-speaking children still face language and cultural barriers throughout America, and in many places girls still encounter lower expectations than do boys."

The statistical findings of the "unfair outcomes" of education for disadvantaged children are disturbing enough:

- One in four students enrolled in the ninth grade drops out. The dropout rate for black students is just under twice that for white students; the rate for Hispanic students is just over twice that for whites. Forty-five percent of Mexican American and Puerto Rican students who enter high school never finish, compared to 17 percent of Anglo students. Studies conducted in urban high schools reveal dropout rates as high as 85 percent for native Americans and 70 to 80 percent for Puerto Ricans.

- Black students are more than three times as likely to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded as are white students, but only half as likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented. Only 25 percent of Hispanic students are enrolled in courses that lead to a college education, compared to 37 percent of all high school graduates.

- In 1984, Mexican American and Puerto Rican students had Scholastic Aptitude Test scores a full 78 points below those of Anglos in the verbal part and 75 points lower in the math, according to the College Board.

- In high school, blacks are suspended three times as often as whites. Minority students are about 25 percent of the school population, but they constitute about 40 percent of all suspended and expelled students. In Kentucky, black students in 1980 made up 12 percent of the school enrollment but 31 percent of all school suspensions. Data cited in studies by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights show that black students are also over one-and-a-half times more likely than white students to receive corporal punishment.

- Males and females achieve equally in most major subject areas at age nine, but by age 13 females begin a decline and by age 17 are behind males in mathematics, reading, science, and social studies. Vocational education programs remain overwhelmingly segregated by sex, with females clustered in those programs that prepare them for the lowest paying jobs. Females comprise 92 percent of those studying to be secretaries or cosmetologists, but only 5 percent of those in electrical engineering.

* Hispanics in the United States comprise four different subgroups — Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others. Approximately 60 percent are of Mexican ancestry.

After looking behind the facts to educational practices, the two panels emerged with a number of serious charges against public schools. Among them are the following:

A disproportionate number of poor and minority youngsters are grouped in curriculum tracks that thwart their aspirations and reinforce their sense of failure. Standardized testing serves to diminish the expectations of linguistic, cultural, and racial minorities. Such practices "result in schools that are primarily sorting-out institutions, in which many students are excluded from quality educational experiences," finds the Board.

Little if any effort is made to retain students who are at risk of failing or dropping out. The two reports charge that some schools even "push out" students who are regarded as "undesirable" by resorting to a variety of teaching, administrative, and disciplinary practices that discourage school attendance. Teenage mothers and pregnant adolescents also face in-school barriers that discourage them from pursuing their education.

Schools continue to discriminate against a large and increasing number of Hispanic students, according to the reports. They do this by paying lip-service to bilingual education and then offering flawed, ineffective, or damaging programs. Rarely, says the National Commission, do schools offer programs that enable Hispanic students to gain a full command of English while helping them to retain or acquire literacy in Spanish. Only about one-third of the estimated 2.7 million limited-English-proficient students aged 5 to 14 receive any form of special programming responsive to their linguistic needs. Schools also discriminate by mislabeling minority students and "warehousing" them in special education classes.

Standardized tests, with their "narrow and rigid" definition of how children should be able to exhibit their knowledge determines whether schools see children as "okay" or not, believes Beverly P. Cole, principal of an alternative school in New York. "In the process we damage all children — we devalue the variety of strengths they bring with them to school. All differences become handicaps."

The use of suspensions in public schools is frequent, yet most suspensions are for nonthreatening behavior, the reports note. The most frequent reason given by school personnel for suspension is "defiance of authority," followed by "chronic tardiness," "chronic absence," and "profanity or vulgarity." The detrimental effect of suspensions on the education and development of students is severe. Not only are suspensions shown to be ineffective in encouraging good discipline, they keep students out of class and on the streets and alienate them from school. Due process is often not adhered to: an accusation becomes proof of guilt; a student's explanation counts for little against the word of a teacher or assistant principal.

These practices appear to contribute in some areas to the high dropout rates — rates that are not necessarily reflected in national data or in the official statistics produced by localities. In Chicago, for example, students who leave school before graduation are grouped in 19 separate categories called "leave codes." Only one of these categories is labeled "drop out — lack of interest and/or poor scholarship." Other categories are "lost — not coming to school"; "deceased"; "entered verified employment"; "needed at home"; "married"; "transferred to a school outside Chicago"; and "cannot adjust." Using this system, the Chicago Board of Education reported a dropout rate between 5 and 10 percent during the past decade, while advocacy and community organizations contend that the real overall dropout rate is closer to 50 percent and as high as 70 percent in some predominantly minority school districts.

The manipulation of dropout and failure rates is by no means limited to Chicago. In San Antonio, district school superintendent James Vásquez says school officials are known to advise a student who is doing poorly in school to have his mother write a letter saying that the family is moving out of the district. "No one ever bothers to find out whether the kid has actually moved," he says.

Though schools, the reports say, must bear major blame for educational failure among minority and poor children, lack of support from the larger society also plays a large part. Federal support for public education and especially for compensatory education in reading and mathematics for low-income children has declined significantly since 1981. Title I programs,* which at their peak served only 40 to 57 percent of eligible children, have suffered a 20 percent cut in real dollars in the past three years, the Board of Inquiry finds, while the National Commission reports that federal spending for inner-city school systems has been reduced by 21 percent. Head Start, which both reports regard as essential to the educational development of minority and low-income youngsters, now serves only 18 percent of poor children, according to the Board of Inquiry. Meanwhile, funding for schools serving middle- and upper-income students has increased.

Inequities in school financing have taken their toll. In Texas and Massachusetts, affluent districts spend as much as $4,000 more per child than do poor districts. In Kentucky, $30,000 more per classroom is spent in wealthy districts than is spent in poor ones. Census data show that Kentucky ranks the worst among all states in the number of people over age 25 who do not have a high school diploma. David Jackson, director of the state's Department of Dropout Prevention, points out that 72 out of every 100 students do not go on to college. Yet, he says, 75 percent of state funding for special programs is directed toward college-bound students, who comprise only 28 percent of the school population. "We have here a real push toward an elitist system," Jackson says.

All of which adds up to one general conclusion embedded in the reports: There are two systems of public education in the United States. One system, rich with resources and talent, serves middle-class and affluent white youth. "The other system is a pauper's system," states Josué M. Gonzáles, who is associate superintendent of schools in Chicago and a member of the National Commission. Gonzáles adds, "And it's going to get worse unless society decides to renegotiate its contract with public education."

(Continued on page 6)

* Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provides funds for compensatory education programs in reading and math in public schools. Title I aid was collapsed into Chapter I of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981.

Rosa is Mexican American, Linda is white, Irene is black. They live in different parts of the country. What they have in common are problems that afflict millions of disadvantaged youngsters at home and in American schools. They are examples of the children behind the statistics presented in the two national reports.

Rosa

Rosa, a 15-year-old student in a poor, Hispanic community in San Antonio, is not defeated yet. But she is wounded. Like lots of her friends, she is failing about half her courses. And like them, she has never found an adult at the school to whom she can talk about her life. Just for an instant this school year, she shed her anonymity. She wrote a composition about her future plans and her family life. She said that she hoped to go to college and begin a career as a cosmetologist. "But that's if I finish school," she wrote. "I hope I do. I really want to!"

Then Rosa began to describe her family. She has four sisters and one brother. Only she and her younger sister are attending school. "All my other sisters and my brother are dropouts," she wrote on. "I see the way they are right now, I wouldn't want to be like them! I really want to graduate. Graduation is my only hope, but it's hard, and that's life."

Life has been chaotic for Rosa. Someone shot her grandmother at her front door. A month before that, her uncle was shot and killed on the pavement outside Rosa's house. The killers, Rosa says, live right across the street from her.

Her brother has gone from smoking grass and sniffing paint spray to cocaine and heroin use. She knows this because most days on her way home from school she passes an alley where her brother and his friends hang out. "I see them passing the needle," she says. "They pass it right in front of me."

The young women in Rosa's life are not in much better shape than the young men. Her closest friend, Lisa, who is 14, is pregnant. Her cousin is 16 and pregnant and is going to have to raise the child by herself. Her boyfriend, the father of her child, was shot and killed at a party.

Rosa's oldest sister has two children, whom she is raising by herself. She visits Rosa's house three or four times a week. "I wish she wouldn't come," says Rosa, "because all she and my mother do is scream at each other. Then my mother gets nervous and starts to cry."

If Rosa had one wish, it would be that "I could live with somebody else. Some place where it's quiet. Some place where sometimes I could do my homework."

Has Rosa ever talked to a staff member of the school — a teacher or a counselor or an assistant principal — about her problems? "I wish my teachers knew," she says, "but they never ask me. My counselor talks to me about the credits I need, but he never talks to me about my house." Does she think the teachers would help her if they did know what she was going through? "I don't think the teachers care," Rosa replies. "They're nobody special. Just people like me. Teachers are not gonna do anything, anyway. They're just gonna listen to me. That's all."

Linda

While Rosa teeters on a tightrope that stretches from school to her outside life, Linda has already fallen off. She is a statistic — a certified, official dropout. But there is not much difference in their living conditions. Rosa's grandparents may have come from Mexico to San Antonio, while Linda's parents traveled north from Appalachia to Newport, Kentucky, a city of 25,000 people just across the border from Cincinnati. But what they have in common is a home and street life marked by violence, anarchy, and blasted dreams. They have something else in common: Their schools knew little about the disorder they encountered every day when they went home and didn't seem interested in finding out.

Linda left high school in the ninth grade when she was 14. Like many youngsters, Linda was having trouble adjusting to her first year in high school. Rosa responds to her problems by withdrawing, by lowering her voice and avoiding eye contact. Linda responded with anger and rebellion. "I was just damn angry all that year," she remembers. She fought with her schoolmates. She wore tee-shirts with words printed on them that violated the school's dress code. She was caught smoking in the bathroom. Many days she would report to her home room, get marked "present," and then disappear through the back door of the school, a common practice among students that is blinked at by her school.

The dean of the school decided that what Linda needed was more discipline. "So one afternoon she pulls me out of class and tells me she's gonna keep me in detention an hour after school every day for the rest of the year. I told her I wasn't taking it. So she said, 'Fine, you're suspended.' I threw my books on her desk and walked out."

(Continued on page 6)

Linda's response was not solely one of defiance; it also had something to do with survival. If she had stayed late in school, she would have had to walk home alone through an isolated wooded area. Two years before, when she was 12 years old, she was raped by three men in that same place. "If I'd had bus money I would've taken a bus," she says. "But my mother wouldn't give me no money."

The dean did not know about the rape. She did not know that Linda's stepfather regularly tried to seduce her and that her mother was alcoholic and was always blaming Linda for trying to break up their marriage. There was a lot that the school never learned about Linda. "I didn't leave that school," she says. "I *quit* on it, after it *quit* on me."

Irene

No one would say that Irene quit on school. Why would a young woman who was in the top fifth percentile of her junior high school class and in the top 10 of her high school class quit? Why would someone with an A-average, who was articulate and well-read, who had a dazzling personality that could make a rock melt, why would someone like Irene quit? When she was 15 years old, Irene *had* to leave school. Her mother had become involved with a religious movement that occupied most of her time. She ordered Irene to stay home and take care of her two sisters, aged nine and five. "I liked school; I loved school," Irene says. "But you know you can't go to school if your mother tells you you can't go to school."

Did Irene talk to a teacher or counselor about her mother? "Oh, I did that before, but that's like an act of death," she says. "The year before, I went to my counselor and said, 'My mother is keeping me at home to watch my sister and clean up the house.' And I'm crying there in his office, pleading with him, 'Don't tell my mother, please.' But before I got back home that day, he had called her to tell her exactly what I'd told him. And my mother beat the hell out of me. I said to myself, 'I'll never tell them anything ever again.' And I didn't."

After a year away from school, she became pregnant. Irene had the baby and moved away from home. She went on welfare. In all this time, she received two phone calls and a letter from school authorities. "Each time my mother'd just say I was sick. And that made me very upset. I'd hear about all these kids that they try to make go to school. And then they just forget about the ones who really want to go."

Irene had something—a fierce drive, an amazing inner determination—that kept her going, that never let her succumb to the school's indifference and her mother's selfishness. At 19, she is now completing a general education degree program for adolescent mothers and plans to go on to college. "Well, I have big dreams for Charlie, my son," she says. "When I get out of college, I want to get a nice, peaceful job. I want to put him in a private school, a good private school where he'll really learn. I want him to have a good background so he can say, 'My mother raised me right.' Even if he doesn't act like it, he won't be sorry for the way I raised him." ■

The Basis of School Reform: The Caring Community

To one New York City witness before the National Commission, *A Nation at Risk* and other reports that echo its findings represent "the last gasp, the last ultimate statement of the curriculum-centered approach to life—what these kids need is just two more courses in science, two more in mathematics . . . and they are going to do wonders." Not so, he says. Progress for disadvantaged youngsters will come about only when high academic standards are accompanied by "an extraordinary level of support, both internal [in the schools] and community-wide. . . ." Failure will be reversed only through "a shared commitment by the engaged parent, the engaged principal, and the engaged student." This is the basic import of the two panels' recommendations.

Many analysts believe that school reform, to be successful on behalf of poor and minority youngsters, must begin by redefining the scale and scope of the problem. In his testimony before the National Commission, Anthony J. Alvarado, former chancellor of the New York City public schools, who once served as superintendent of an East Harlem school district, proposed a redefinition of what constitutes a high-risk student.

"High risk is not the 5 percent of the kids who are already not showing up in junior high school," he told the Commission. "High risk has to be redefined for almost the entire population. At any given moment, any one of these kids could drop out of school, because something hits them and they have nothing. They don't have any resources to deal with it. Whether it's substance abuse, whether it's sexuality, whether it's life, whether it's family, whether it's not being able to cope academically, whatever it is."

"Schools usually do not offer the aid and comfort that would enable youngsters to overcome these setbacks," maintains Paul Ylvisaker, cochairman of the National Commission. Detached and insulated from the communities that surround the school, educators often have little understanding of or empathy for the youngsters they educate. "The important things in these kids' lives are not the curriculum or organizing the school day differently," Ylvisaker says. "What counts is caring. The students want to know, 'Are you interested in us?' "

The bottom line is this, says Ylvisaker: "We're not going to be able to substitute gimmicks, organization, or money for a one-to-one relationship. The truth is that this society doesn't care enough about its kids, and the schools aren't that different in that respect."

Harold Howe II, cochairman of the Board of Inquiry, believes that the damage done to children and adolescents stems from something worse than lack of interest in them by adults. It is a continuing, unrelenting assault on their self-confidence. "From very early in their school experience, these kids are told, you aren't doing it right, you don't understand it, you gotta do it again, you're no good. That litany accumulates in a kid's psyche. It defeats so many of them."

Clearly, some schools in this country are concerned about the lives of their students. As they conducted hearings in var-

ious cities, the two panels found schools that combined high academic standards and a strong supportive structure that extends from the classroom to the home. In Morris High School in the Bronx, New York, a dynamic principal named Frances Vásquez* provided the leadership and vision that are transforming the school into the "caring community" the National Commission talks about in its report. Beginning with the ninth grade, the school is gradually breaking up into smaller units, each with a team of adults — teachers, guidance counselors, deans — who "provide realistic, on-the-spot help whenever a student needs it," according to Carmen Russo, who has succeeded Vásquez as principal. Through the encouragement of small-group identity, Russo maintains, "kids learn that people care about them and care about what happens to them."

The golden rule that is being applied in Morris High School is "constant adult contact." The shift into smaller units began in September 1983 with the freshmen class and is being extended to the sophomore level now, so it is too soon to calculate the results. An encouraging sign is the 8 percent rise in attendance rates among freshmen students.

In Floyd County, Kentucky, the David School, which has a staff composed primarily of Catholic lay workers, claims a 90 percent graduation rate with youngsters who have been written off by the public schools. Hardly a night goes by when some teacher or staff member at the David School does not visit a child or a parent whose life is in disarray. "If there's one kid at this school whose life we don't know about, we feel we have failed," says Jean Ford, principal of the school.

The national panels found, however, that schools such as Morris and David are exceptions. Large numbers and wide diversity of children combined with time pressures, inflexible schedules, and an increasingly standardized curriculum present teachers in most metropolitan schools with an all-but-impossible task, suggests the Board of Inquiry report. Here is the way Earlene Levicy remembers a class in the Detroit public high school where she taught: "The bell rings. You've got 35 to 38 kids in the class. If you have 30, it's a teacher's dream. Fifteen of them are cutting up. Five of them are coming in late and you've got to handle paperwork for them, write out passes, or whatever. Of course, you don't have an aide. Of the 15 who are cutting up, 10 are ready to go on with the lesson. The other 5 need specialized help. You've got 40 minutes, mind you.

"So you deal with those 15 behavior problems. Already you're seeing the minutes dribble away and you're getting frantic, so you start to scrap the lesson you've laid out. The 10 who are ready to go on with the lesson are getting bored. The 5 who need help are lost. In the back of your mind you're

* Frances Vásquez is now superintendent of Bronx High School.

saying, 'I've got to cover X number of chapters.' And then you've got to get all this material ready to be put on computers, for this ridiculous master reading program that you know doesn't work. But the board of education downtown keeps telling you it's going to work. And so you do it, because you want to be helpful.

"Now you've got what—20 minutes left. And you're thinking, 'I'll try to reach that middle-of-the-road student.' But then some smart alec tries to mess with you and at the same time someone else who needs your undivided attention walks into the room. Just when you realize you've got 30 books for 35 kids, rrrrring, the 40 minutes are up, and a few minutes later a new class is walking in and the problems start all over. By the time you've gone through this three times in a day you are *tired*. So some poor kid who really wants to learn raises his hand and says, 'Teacher.' You spin around and yell at him, *'What do you want!'* It's ridiculous. I tell you, when I get to be superintendent of schools, some changes are going to be made."

Lest one conclude that Earline Levicy is an unqualified teacher trying to blame "the system" for her own shortcomings, it should be noted that in 1983 she was cited by the Detroit public school system as one of the outstanding teachers in the city who "works both attitudinal and academic miracles." Her students, most of them expelled or suspended from mainstream public schools, received "individualized attention," according to the citation from the school system. They learned because the teacher not only knew their academic strengths and weaknesses, but their names, their interests, and their anxieties. But Levicy no longer works her miracles at a conventional high school; she now teaches in a General Education Degree (GED) program conducted by the Detroit Urban League.

The presence of a person such as Levicy who has the skill to make caring effective, could make the difference between the student who succeeds in school, graduates, and goes on to build a productive life and the student who disappears into the mean streets of the barrio or the ghetto, members of the two panels believe. Again and again, when students who are succeeding in school are asked what accounts for their success, they answer, "I met someone who cared about me." It matters little whether the title is homeroom teacher, counselor, athletic coach, or mentor, that person needs to know as much about the student's life outside school as about the student's academic progress. He or she can also serve as a link between the school and the family and the world of work.

But an encounter with a caring adult is usually a matter of chance in today's schools, and more often than not, that individual disappears from the youngster's life at the end of the school term or school year or when the student leaves elementary or middle school. Nationally, too, there is a ratio of only one counselor for every 500 students. In some school systems the ratio is more like one to 700. In any case, in city after city, witnesses told the panel, few high school counselors do more than advise students on what courses to take and how many credits they need to graduate. "Basically, they are paper shufflers," says Manford Byrd, who becomes school superintendent of Chicago in March 1985. "Otherwise, they are seen as the enforcer of the rules. Most of them have no rapport with the kids."

Today, Ylvisaker suggests, counseling services should perhaps be based in the community rather than in the schools. "Maybe we should train a counselor who comes out of the community and has a real feeling for where the kids live and for what the kids learn."

When Parents Become Involved

Parents are at the center of almost every recommendation for overcoming existing barriers to excelience in education, since they can influence virtually every area of school life, from what is taught and how, to ways that students are treated, to the systems of grouping students by learning ability, to policies determining promotion and graduation.

For more than 20 years, educators have debated the value of giving parents some policymaking role in schools and the importance of understanding the social and cultural backgrounds of minority and poor students. Parent involvement has been the key entitlement in special education laws and in other federal education initiatives, notably Head Start, Follow-Through, Title I, and the Bilingual Education Act. In recent years, however, requirements for parental involvement in these programs have been weakened.

Both the National Commission and the Board of Inquiry find that little effort is made to involve parents and members of the community in educational policymaking. When parents do raise their voices, observe the panels, they are more often than not ignored by teachers, by school administrators, and by district and citywide education officials. "They are unwelcome guests," says Josué Gonzáles of Chicago. "Once you let parents into the schools, they ask questions," says James Vásquez in San Antonio. "Teachers and principals would rather run schools as a secret society. Parents scare the hell out of them."

Ronald Mitchell, the leader of a parents' group in Chicago's Englewood school district, describes what can happen when parents do raise questions: "Many people feel that if you ask questions, even innocent ones, your child will pay for it. Parent participation is desired only and if the parent is focusing on what the school staff feels is appropriate. As citizens and parents, we can raise funds, sell candy, and bake cakes. Sometimes, [school personnel] agree, we can even work with our own children effectively. Do not, however, attempt to understand the system. Please do not mention rights. Don't dare say advocacy and, above all, no questions about finances."

When parents have shared in policymaking, they have sometimes made a substantial impact upon a school or school district. In the Edgewood district in San Antonio, parents and other community members successfully managed an $8 million school bond referendum. At Juarez High School in Chicago, parents are actively involved in developing a dropout prevention program.

But it is not only on an organized level that parents can affect the quality of education their children receive, the two panels

believe. If parents are granted access to the schools, and teachers and administrators are willing to listen to them, they can evoke the revealing detail, the nuances of culture and environment, that gives the teacher insight into the students' world beyond the classroom. José Cárdenas recalls that when he was superintendent of schools in San Antonio, counselors in his district organized a drive to punish students who missed school for "family reasons." He brought in a group of Hispanic parents who explained that their nine- and ten-year-olds were often the only ones who could translate from Spanish into English when someone in the family visited the doctor (who invariably spoke no Spanish). The drive to punish the absent youngsters suddenly lost steam.

Teachers often complained to Cárdenas that Mexican American students were not learning English rapidly enough. Cárdenas brought in parents to describe what it is like to grow up poor and Mexican American in a barrio of San Antonio. The parents talked about a cramped apartment or "shotgun" house where seven, eight, or more people lived. The parents described the constant din of freeway traffic, which is as common in poor communities as the ambulance or police car siren.

Compounding the difficulties of mastering standard English is the fact that Mexican American children grow up in the barrio trying to block out sounds, explains Cárdenas. "When they come to school, 'push' and 'bush' sound exactly the same. So do 'much' and 'mush.'" After two weeks of intensive audio discrimination training, the youngsters in the school, who the teachers said just "couldn't learn," were advancing as rapidly as students in the upper curriculum tracks of their grade level.

Manford Byrd, the new school superintendent in Chicago, is one who is sympathetic to parent involvement in the education of their children. He says it will be a top priority for his administration "to have inner-city parents exert much influence on the instructional program as suburban parents do. Nothing less than a grassroots movement will change the schools. If we want to do something about the epidemic of failure, it has to start with a group in the community agitating and advocating for youngsters."

Linking School to the World of Work

Both national studies emphasize that schools should be doing much more than they are to prepare students to enter the changing world of work. By this they mean not only the teaching of specific technical or craft skills, but the development of social and interpersonal traits that often make the difference between a young person's success and failure in the workplace. Thirty years ago, high school graduates or even dropouts could rely on an informal network of relatives and friends who helped them find a job, taught them some basic skills and, perhaps more important, explained the rules of work. They gave young people enough time to prove themselves, and they eased the passage from the culture of adolescence to the culture of work and adulthood.

Today, most minority and poor kids never get that introduc-

tion, and they lack advocates. Instead, they often grow up in an environment where the dominant values of the workplace — social diplomacy, competitiveness, and striving — are largely absent. I. Ray Jones, director of the Detroit Transit Alternative, a program for adolescents who have left home and school, detects a "frightening decrease in problem-solving skills" among enrollees in the program. "Traditionally, we expected kids to know how to live in American society. But these kids are coming out of a world which says, 'Whatever my life is, I have to accept it.' " Jones partly blames the current system of welfare which, he says, has "propounded the notion that you can survive without competition or striving. There is no need to achieve. There is no notion of struggle. The tragedy is that welfare has allowed poor folks to lose the real scenario of life in America." In a caring school, the counselor or mentor would begin to introduce students to that scenario — to the positive notion of struggle.

The National Commission believes that the business community working with the schools could do much to ease the transition of disadvantaged youth from school to work. Not only do programs that offer part-time and summer employment enable students to bring in income, they help inculcate good work habits and attitudes that bolster school attendance and academic performance.

Today, coordinated school and work programs are sometimes offered before the senior year of high school, but these serve only a small number of the students who would benefit from them, says the National Commission. Students chosen to participate in school-work programs are frequently those who show the most promise, not the ones who are at the greatest risk of dropping out. The Commission recommends an expansion of targeted work programs for disadvantaged students that link the business community to education. Ideally, work awareness programs should begin at the junior high level.

The Board of Inquiry report raises a disturbing issue that may be beyond the schools to remedy, however. An unemployment rate for minority youth of 50 percent and 65 percent for dropouts may not only be a function of poor education, lack of counseling, or lack of work/study opportunities, but a consequence of the changing structure of the economy and jobs. As Bennett Harrison, professor of urban studies and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, stated before the state's Joint Legislative Committee on Education in 1984, the problem is one of "increasing polarization of the job structure," in which the middle-level jobs are disappearing "at a frighteningly rapid pace."

The Board of Inquiry worries about the effect of this change on schooling. "It is not hard to envision that in an economy increasingly fragmented into high- and low-level jobs, the same sort of two-tier structure would be applied more generally to public schools." One parent who spoke before the Board of Inquiry in Boston warned, "The logic of gearing school to the shape of the economy as it exists now and can be projected into the future will be to depress the level of education for most students, while preparing a small elite for the fraction of high-level scientific and executive jobs that will exist."

While no one has the knowledge to predict what the new jobs will be in another 15 years, the Board is asking, for what kind of future will schools be preparing disadvantaged youths?

The Contract is a Two-Way Street

If schools and minority and poor communities are going to renegotiate their contract, then this may require the community to assume new responsibilities, some analysts say. Merchants in the community may have to sign an agreement not to buy stolen goods offered by youths in the area. Parents may have to unite to force the relocation of a video arcade near a school when the arcade is a center for drug traffic and a meeting place for gang members. A program to involve grandmothers in assisting teenagers in raising their infants may have to be organized. Clergy in the community may have to provide more help to teenage parents and underachieving students.

In short, the contract between the community and the schools runs both ways. "Parents will have to do more, children will have to do more, and the schools will have to do more," says Josué González in Chicago.

But the time when school officials join with others in a community partnership does not appear to be imminent. If anything, the drift has been toward more centralized policymaking at the state level, with an emphasis on standardized curricula, instruction, and testing.

The pivotal issue, finally, appears not to be so much a change in curricula or teaching method as a shift in policymaking authority. Who defines success in schools and how that success should be achieved are really what may be at stake.

Neither of the two national reports suggests that a shift to community-based, decentralized policymaking would resolve the problems of the schools. The reports emphasize that minority and poor students will require greater federal support of

programs designed to meet their needs; inequities in school financing will have to be reduced; teaching and counseling will have to be improved; a new form of mentorship will have to be devised for students who cannot find on their own an adult who cares about them; education and social services will have to be linked; and schools will have to respond to the fact that teenage girls are giving birth at the rate of 1,540 babies a day.

The changes that will be required to ensure vastly improved outcomes for disadvantaged students in the public schools will not come easily. For one thing, only 27 percent of adult Americans have children in the public schools. The political and moral base of support for the public schools has eroded greatly. Unfortunately, as the Board of Inquiry points out, there are no easy or cheap roads to educational excellence, especially where poor or minority children are concerned. But the alternative is for schools to become agencies that perpetuate the inequalities in the larger society — an effect that would be both impractical and incompatible with the goals of a democratic society.

"We have been warned for a decade or so by some thoughtful people that we're headed for terrible trouble," says González. "And now we're seeing it. We're seeing children of stress. Rome is burning all around them. It may be too late for the most needy of our kids. But the kids one notch above we may be able to save. But that will only happen school by school, community by community. When schools begin to say, 'We're part of the community. We're all equal partners in this business,' maybe then, just then, we can do something for our kids." ■

About the writer:

Bernard Lefkowitz is the recipient of a Ford Foundation grant for a book on youngsters who have left school and home during their adolescence. The book, entitled Tough Change: Growing Up On Your Own in America, *will be published by Macmillan in 1986.*

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* Deceased.

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